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Goodbye office, hello 'desk on demand'

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Few rooms invite envy like your boss's corner office. It has a desk that's bigger than your cubicle, a great view and a nameplate on the door. The room is ridiculously big, and that's the point — the extra space marks her status.

One might expect a traditional hierarchy of offices at the Wellington St. W. offices of IBM, in the classic TD Waterhouse Tower. Yet in the company's recently renovated, third-floor premises, dedicated to supporting clients in the financial services sector, no one has his or her own room — not even the boss.

Shared desks, stay-at-home workers, space at a premium: welcome to Toronto's new alternative offices. With commercial real estate prices still high and sustainability a hot topic, some brave (or crazy, perhaps) companies are turning their workplaces upside-down in a bid to shrink their square footage — and their carbon footprint.

Proponents of the “non-territorial” office, as some call it, claim that on any given day, as much as half of the desks in “seated entitlement” (read: traditional) workplaces go unused, as employees go to offsite meetings, see clients, take their breaks or are absent on sick days.

“Real estate for a lot of firms is their second-largest expense,” says Jim Brodie, manager of IBM's mobility and so-called “workplace-on-demand” programs. “The real estate industry for years has tracked density — how many square feet per person do people need? Which is fine, if everybody's in the office. But what we were finding is we had great densities from a real estate perspective, but our space was 40-, 50-, 60-per-cent empty on any given day.”

So IBM took a drastic step. With a desk-sharing scheme, and by allowing employees to work remotely, they reduced their downtown Toronto office space by 40 per cent — consolidating three offices into two in a pilot program over the past few years. The company has even devised a reservation system that employees use to book desks from the office or online, and soon from their BlackBerrys.

IBM is now a workspace “evangelist,” leading other companies on office tours.

“Now people are enabled to work three days a week instead of five days,” says Brodie, who works from his Uxbridge home and goes to his Markham office only for meetings. The Markham office, IBM's Canadian headquarters, houses software development, services professionals, sales and corporate marketing, and the bulk of the employee base.

“Young talent expects to work this way. Older folks want to ‘retire’ to the cottage and work from there.”

For businesses in Europe, where workplaces have long been designed to maximize scant real estate, such innovations are nothing new, says Caroline Hughes, partner of Toronto workplace design firm Figure3, which helped IBM gut and reinvent its space.

“In North America, we've had access to so much space for so long,” she says.

No more, however. Hughes points out that now, “the cost of real estate is going up. There is increased support for sustainable initiatives — it's greener to be a company that spends less on energy. But for a business, it's reduction of real estate, and those costs that is important.”

Trish Clarry, national head of corporate real estate for Telus, agrees.

“It's crazy for us to have dedicated desks that people are in a couple of times a week or even less frequently than that,” she says.



At IBM's Wellington St. W. office, desks are arranged in pinwheels, with no cubicle walls between them. Workers share desks, reserving them on days they will be in the office.

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In 2006, Telus asked employees to tell them how they wanted to work. Did they want to work from home? Did they want to work on the road, visiting clients? While 30 per cent opted to keep a dedicated desk, the others chose to cut their office umbilical cords.

Telus converted half its 25 York St. office to include open collaborative meeting spaces and high-definition video conference, or "telepresence," rooms, to keep absent workers connected.

The company is now rolling out the program to all its locations. It projects a 39 per cent reduction in its total floor space between 2009 and 2015.

"This is bigger than real estate," says Brodie.

Could this be the end of the cubicle as we know it?

Inside IBM's downtown digs, minimal white desks are arranged in pinwheels, with no cubicle walls between them. Glass walls may be scrawled on with markers.

Brodie plays with one of the touchscreen kiosks near all the entrances, pulling up a map of the office. The blue squares show desks that are available to be booked, he explains. The desks where his co-workers have logged in are highlighted.

"Last year, over 1,500 people booked space on 146 workstations here," he says.

Finally, we arrive at the executive section, but it looks much like the rest of the office. A few private rooms lie to the side, but none have nameplates.

Even the office's stuff has evaporated. Employees are down to a single drawer each, says Brodie.

With the real estate reductions, use of the office's air conditioning, heating and lighting plummeted. It would be using 40 per cent more energy if it hadn't done the redesign, says Brodie.

IBM uses Voice-over-Internet Protocol, or VoIP, technology, to forward phone calls to either their mobile or the phone at their desk, if they've booked one.

The movement isn't without its critics.

"A lot of the old-school managers still worry about productivity," says IBM associate partner Bruce Dow, who works in management consulting. "If they're not here, how will I know they're working?" Bosses must reward projects completed rather than the employees who spend long hours at their desks, he says.

The difference may be generational, says Hughes.

"What do millennials want? Do they want a cubicle? They like having the freedom to work where they want to work. (That's why) this is really attractive to groups in their 20s and 30s. As my generation starts to wind up — we started out our careers expecting that private office, so we might be resistant."

To that older generation (and a few outside it), a personal office may represent more than just four walls. Far from just a waste of space, it can be a precious room of one's own, an indispensable place to work undisturbed. And for those who succeeded in attaining the corner office, losing it is losing a status symbol.

Then there are some for whom a desk is a home away from home; those identical, über-functional workstations look sterile and inhumane with nary a potted plant or a clipped, yellowed comic strip.

What of that employee who has lovingly tacked up 16 photos of the kids, the dog and the cat?

"Now, your photos are on your laptop," laughs Brodie, adding that "some people take their photos out but put them away at the end of the day."

Attractive as they might sound, alternative workspaces are also far from a one-size-fits-all solution to cities' energy waste and urban sprawl woes. No employer that pays by the hour could let workers show up whenever they liked. Many businesses still couldn't do without decades of accumulated paper files.

Yet IBM expects that the idea will spread in Canada, says Brodie. "A lot of firms are looking at this space and saying, 'Geez, we should be doing this too.'"

